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UNTIL THE EVENING

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Until the Evening

By
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UNTIL THE EVENING

PRAYER

I AM often baffled when I try to think what prayer is; if our thoughts do indeed lie open before the eyes of the Father, like a little clear globe of water which a man may hold in his hand — and I am sure they do — it certainly seems hardly worth while to put those desires into words. Many good Christians seem to me to conceive of prayers partly as a kind of tribute they are bound to pay, and partly as requests that are almost certain to be refused. With such people religion, then, means the effort which they make to trust a Father who hears prayers, and very seldom answers them. But this does not seem to be a very reasonable attitude.

I confess that liturgical prayer does not very much appeal to me. It does not seem to me to correspond to any particular need in my mind. It seems to me to sacrifice almost all the things that I mean by prayer — the sustained intention

of soul, the laying of one's own problems before the Father, the expression of one's hopes for others, the desire that the sorrows of the world should be lightened. Of course, a liturgy touches these thoughts at many points; but the exercise of one's own liberty of aspiration and wonder, the pursuing of a train of thought, the quiet dwelling upon mysteries, are all lost if one has to stumble and run in a prescribed track. To follow a service with uplifted attention requires more mental agility than I possess; point after point is raised, and yet, if one pauses to meditate, to wonder, to aspire, one is lost, and misses the thread of the service. I suppose that there is or ought to be something in the united act of intercession. But I dislike all public meetings, and think them a waste of time. I should make an exception in favour of the Sacrament, but the rapid disappearance of the majority of a congregation before the solemn act seems to me to destroy the sense of unity with singular rapidity. As to the old theory that God requires of his followers that they should unite at intervals in presenting him with a certain amount of complimentary effusion, I cannot even approach the idea. The holiest, simplest, most benevolent being of whom I can conceive would be inexpressibly pained and distressed by such an

intention on the part of the objects of his care; and to conceive of God as greedy of recognition seems to me to be one of the conceptions which insult the dignity of the soul.

I have heard lately one or two mediæval stories which illustrate what I mean. There is a story of a pious monk, who, worn out by long vigils, fell asleep, as he was saying his prayers before a crucifix. He was awakened by a buffet on the head, and heard a stern voice saying, "Is this an oratory or a dormitory?" I cannot conceive of any story more grotesquely human than the above, or more out of keeping with one's best thoughts about God. Again, there is a story which is told, I think, of one of the first monasteries of the Benedictine order. One of the monks was a lay brother, who had many little menial tasks to fulfil; he was a well-meaning man, but extremely forgetful, and he was often forced to retire from some service in which he was taking part, because he had forgotten to put the vegetables on to boil, or omitted other duties which would lead to the discomfort of the brethren. Another monk, who was fond of more secular occupations, such as wood-carving and garden-work, and not at all attached to habits of prayer, seeing this, thought that he would do the same;

and he too used to slip away from a service, in order to return to the business that he loved better. The Prior of the monastery, an anxious, humble man, was at a loss how to act; so he called in a very holy hermit, who lived in a cell hard by, that he might have the benefit of his advice. The hermit came and attended an Office. Presently the lay brother rose from his knees and slipped out. The hermit looked up, followed him with his eyes, and appeared to be greatly moved. But he took no action, and only addressed himself more assiduously to his prayers. Shortly after, the other brother rose and went out. The hermit looked up, and seeing him go, rose too, and followed him to the door, where he fetched him a great blow upon the head that nearly brought him to the ground. Thereupon the stricken man went humbly back to his place and addressed himself to his prayers; and the hermit did the same.

The Office was soon over, and the hermit went to the Prior's room to talk the matter over. The hermit said: "I bore in my mind what you told me, dear Father, and when I saw one of the brethren rise from his prayers, I asked God to show me what I should do; but I saw a wonderful thing; there was a shining

figure with our brother, his hand upon the other's sleeve; and this fair comrade, I have no doubt, was an angel of God, that led the brother forth, that he might be about his Father's business. So I prayed the more earnestly. But when our other brother rose, I looked up; and I saw that he had been plucked by the sleeve by a little naked, comely boy, very swarthy of hue, that I saw had no business among our holy prayers; he wore a mocking smile on his face, as though he prevailed in evil. So I rose and followed; and just as they came to the door, I aimed a shrewd blow, for it was told me what to do, at the boy, and struck him on the head, so that he fell to the ground, and presently went to his own place; and then our brother came back to his prayers."

The Prior mused a little over this wonder, and then he said, smiling: "It seemed to me that it was our brother that was smitten." "Very like," said the hermit, "for the two were close together, and I think the boy was whispering in the brother's ear; but give God the glory; for the dear brother will not offend again."

There is an abundance of truth in this wholesome ancient tale; but I will not draw the morals out here. All I will say is that the old theory

of prayer, simple and childlike as it is, seems to have a curious vitality even nowadays. It presupposes that the act of prayer is in itself pleasing to God; and that is what I am not satisfied of.

That theory seems to prevail even more strongly in the Roman Church of to-day than in our own. The Roman priest is not a man occupied primarily with pastoral duties; his business is the business of prayer. To neglect his daily offices is a mortal sin, and when he has said them, his priestly duty is at an end. This does not seem to me to bear any relation to the theory of prayer as enunciated in the Gospel. There the practice of constant and secret prayer, of a direct and informal kind, is enjoined upon all followers of Christ; but Our Lord seems to be very hard upon the lengthy and public prayers of the Pharisees, and indeed against all formality in the matter at all. The only united service that he enjoined upon his followers was the Sacrament of the common meal; and I confess that the saying of formal liturgies in an ornate building seems to me to be a practice which has drifted very far away from the simplicity of individual religion which Christ appears to have aimed at.

My own feeling about prayer is that it should

not be relegated to certain seasons, or attended by certain postures, or even couched in definite language; it should rather be a constant uplifting of the heart, a stretching out of the hands to God. I do not think we should ask for definite things that we desire; I am sure that our definite desires, our fears, our plans, our schemes, the hope that visits one a hundred times a day, our cravings for wealth or success or influence, are as easily read by God, as a man can discern the tiny atoms and filaments that swim in his crystal globe. But I think we may ask to be led, to be guided, to be helped; we may put our anxious little decisions before God; we may ask for strength to fulfil hard duties; we may put our desires for others' happiness, our hopes for our country, our compassion for sorrowing or afflicted persons, our horror of cruelty and tyranny before him; and here I believe lies the force of prayer; that by practising this sense of aspiration in his presence, we gain a strength to do our own part. If we abstain from prayer, if we limit our prayers to our own small desires, we grow, I know, petty and self-absorbed and feeble. We can leave the fulfilment of our concrete aims to God; but we ought to be always stretching out our hands and opening our hearts

to the high and gracious mysteries that lie all about us.

A friend of mine told me that a little Russian peasant, whom he had visited often in a military hospital, told him, at their last interview, that he would tell him a prayer that was always effective, and had never failed of being answered. "But you must not use it," he said, "unless you are in a great difficulty, and there seems no way out." The prayer which he then repeated was this: "Lord, remember King David, and all his grace."

I have never tested the efficacy of this prayer, but I have a thousand times tested the efficacy of sudden prayer in moments of difficulty, when confronted with a little temptation, when overwhelmed with irritation, before an anxious interview, before writing a difficult passage. How often has the temptation floated away, the irritation mastered itself, the right word been said, the right sentence written! To do all we are capable of, and then to commit the matter to the hand of the Father, that is the best that we can do.

Of course, I am well aware that there are many who find this kind of help in liturgical prayer; and I am thankful that it is so. But for myself,

I can only say that as long as I pursued the customary path, and confined myself to fixed moments of prayer, I gained very little benefit. I do not forego the practice of liturgical attendance even now; for a solemn service, with all the majesty of an old and beautiful building full of countless associations, with all the resources of musical sound and ceremonial movement, does uplift and rejoice the soul. And even with simpler services, there is often something vaguely sustaining and tranquillising in the act. But the deeper secret lies in the fact that prayer is an attitude of soul and not a ceremony; that it is an individual mystery, and not a piece of venerable pomp. I would have every one adopt his own method in the matter. I would not for an instant discourage those who find that liturgical usage uplifts them; but neither would I have those to be discouraged who find that it has no meaning for them. The secret lies in the fact that our aim should be a relation with the Father, a frank and reverent confidence, a humble waiting upon God. That the Father loves all his children with an equal love I doubt not. But he is nearest to those who turn to him at every moment, and speak to him with a quiet trustfulness. He alone knows why he has set us in the middle of such a

bewildering world, where joy and sorrow, darkness and light, are so strangely intermingled; and all that we can do is to follow wisely and patiently such clues as he gives us, into the cloudy darkness in which he seems to dwell.

THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

HERE is a story which has much occupied my thoughts lately. A man in middle life, with a widowed sister and her children depending on him, living by professional exertions, is suddenly attacked by a painful, horrible, and fatal complaint. He goes through a terrible operation, and then struggles back to his work again, with the utmost courage and gallantry. Again the complaint returns, and the operation is repeated. After this he returns again to his work, but at last, after enduring untold agonies, he is forced to retire into an invalid life, after a few months of which he dies in terrible suffering, and leaves his sister and the children nearly penniless.

The man was a quiet, simple-minded person, fond of his work, fond of his home, conventional and not remarkable except for the simply heroic quality he displayed, smiling and joking up to the moment of the administering of anæsthetics for his operations, and bearing his sufferings with perfect patience and fortitude, never saying an impatient word, grateful for the smallest services.

His sister, a simple, active woman, with much tender affection and considerable shrewdness, finding that the fear of incurring needless expense distressed her brother, devoted herself to the ghastly and terrible task of nursing him through his illnesses. The children behaved with the same straightforward affection and goodness. None of the circle ever complained, ever said a word which would lead one to suppose that they had any feeling of resentment or cowardice. They simply received the blows of fate humbly, resignedly, and cheerfully, and made the best of the situation.

Now, let us look this sad story in the face, and see if we can derive any hope or comfort from it. In the first place, there was nothing in the man's life which would lead one to suppose that he deserved or needed this special chastening, this crucifixion of the body. He was by instinct humble, laborious, unselfish, and good, all of which qualities came out in his illness. Neither was there anything in the life or character of the sister which seemed to need this stern and severe trial. The household had lived a very quiet, active, useful life, models of good citizens — religious, contented, drawing great happiness from very simple resources.

One's belief in the goodness, the justice, the patience of the Father and Maker of men forbids one to believe that he can ever be wantonly cruel, unjust, or unloving. Yet it is impossible to see the mercy or justice of his actions in this case. And the misery is that, if it could be proved that in one single case, however small, God's goodness had, so to speak, broken down; if there were evidence of neglect or carelessness or indifference, in the case of one single child of his, one single sentient thing that he has created, it would be impossible to believe in his omnipotence any more. Either one would feel that he was unjust and cruel, or that there was some evil power at work in the world which he could not overcome.

For there is nothing remedial in this suffering. The man's useful, gentle life is over, the sister is broken down, unhappy, a second time made desolate; the children's education has suffered, their home is made miserable. The only thing that one can see, that is in any degree a compensation, is the extraordinary kindness displayed by friends, relations, and employers in making things easy for the afflicted household. And then, too, there is the heroic quality of soul displayed by the sufferer himself and his sister — a heroism

which is ennobling to think of, and yet humiliating too, because it seems to be so far out of one's own reach.

This is a very dark abyss of the world into which we are looking. The case is an extreme one perhaps, but similar things happen every day, in this sad and wonderful and bewildering world. Of course, one may take refuge in a gloomy acquiescence, saying that such things seem to be part of the world as it is made, and we cannot explain them, while we dumbly hope that we may be spared such woes. But that is a dark and despairing attitude, and, for one, I cannot live at all, unless I feel that God is indeed more upon our side than that. I cannot live at all, I say. And yet I must live; I must endure the Will of God in whatever form it is laid upon me — in joy or in pain, in contentment or sick despair. Why am I at one with the Will of God when it gives me strength, and hope, and delight? Why am I so averse to it when it brings me languor, and sorrow, and despair? That I cannot tell; and that is the enigma which has confronted men from generation to generation.

But I still believe that there is a Will of God; and, more than that, I can still believe that a day comes for all of us, however far off it may

be, when we shall understand; when these tragedies, that now blacken and darken the very air of Heaven for us, will sink into their places in a scheme so august, so magnificent, so joyful, that we shall laugh for wonder and delight; when we shall think not more sorrowfully over these sufferings, these agonies, than we think now of the sad days in our childhood when we sat with a passion of tears over a broken toy or a dead bird, feeling that we could not be comforted. We smile as we remember such things — we smile at our blindness, our limitations. We smile to reflect at the great range and panorama of the world that has opened upon us since, and of which, in our childish grief, we were so ignorant. Under what conditions the glory will be revealed to us I cannot guess. But I do not doubt that it will be revealed; for we forget sorrow, but we do not forget joy.

THE FAITH OF CHRIST

I READ a terrible letter in a newspaper this morning, a letter from a clergyman of high position, finding fault with a manifesto put out by certain other clergymen; the letter had a certain volubility about it, and the writer seemed to me to pull out rather adroitly one or two loose sticks in his opponents' bundle, and to lay them vehemently about their backs. But, alas! the acrimony, the positiveness, the arrogance of it!

I do not know that I admired the manifesto very much myself; it was a timid and half-hearted document, but it was at least sympathetic and tender. The purport of it was to say that, just as historical criticism has shown that some of the Old Testament must be regarded as fabulous, so we must be prepared for a possible loss of certitude in some of the details of the New Testament. It is conceivable, for instance, that without sacrificing the least portion of the essential teaching of Christ, men may come to feel justified in a certain suspension of judgment with regard to some of the miraculous occurrences

there related; may even grow to believe that an element of exaggeration is there, that element of exaggeration which is never absent from the writings of any age in which scientific historical methods had no existence. A suspension of judgment, say: because in the absence of any converging historical testimony to the events of the New Testament, it will never be possible either to affirm or to deny historically that the facts took place exactly as related; though, indeed, the probability of their having so occurred may seem to be diminished.

The controversialist, whose letter I read with bewilderment and pain, involved his real belief in ingenious sentences, so that one would think that he accepted the statements of the Old Testament, such as the account of the Creation and the Fall, the speaking of Balaam's ass, the swallowing of Jonah by the whale, as historical facts. He went on to say that the miraculous element of the New Testament is accredited by the Revelation of God, as though some definite revelation of truth had taken place at some time or other, which all rational men recognized. But the only objective process which has ever taken place is, that at certain Councils of the Church, certain books of Scripture were selected

as essential documents, and the previous selection of the Old Testament books was confirmed. But would the controversialist say that these Councils were infallible? It must surely be clear to all rational people that the members of these Councils were merely doing their best, under the conditions that then prevailed, to select the books that seemed to them to contain the truth. It is impossible to believe that if the majority at these Councils had supposed that such an account as the account in Genesis of the Creation was mythological, they would thus have attested its literal truth. It never occurred to them to doubt it, because they did not understand the principle that, while a normal event can be accepted, if it is fairly well confirmed, an abnormal event requires a far greater amount of converging testimony to confirm it.

If only the clergy could realise that what ordinary laymen like myself want is a greater elasticity instead of an irrational certainty! If only instead of feebly trying to save the outworks, which are already in the hands of the enemy, they would man the walls of the central fortress! If only they would say plainly that a man could remain a convinced Christian, and yet not be bound to hold to the literal accuracy of

the account of miraculous incidents recorded in the Bible, it would be a great relief.

I am myself in the position of thousands of other laymen. I am a sincere Christian; and yet I regard the Old Testament and the New Testament alike as the work of fallible men and of poetical minds. I regard the Old Testament as a noble collection of ancient writings, containing myths, chronicles, fables, poems, and dramas, the value of which consists in the intense faith in a personal God and Father with which it is penetrated.

When I come to the New Testament, I feel myself, in the Gospels, confronted by the most wonderful personality which has ever drawn breath upon the earth. I am not in a position to affirm or to deny the exact truth of the miraculous occurrences there related; but the more conscious I am of the fallibility, the lack of subtlety, the absence of trained historical method that the writers display, the more convinced I am of the essential truth of the Person and teaching of Christ, because he seems to me a figure so infinitely beyond the intellectual power of those who described him to have invented or created.

If the authors of the Gospels had been men

of delicate literary skill, of acute philosophical or poetical insight, like Plato or Shakespeare, then I should be far less convinced of the integral truth of the record. But the words and sayings of Christ, the ideas which he disseminated, seem to me so infinitely above the highest achievements of the human spirit, that I have no difficulty in confessing, humbly and reverently, that I am in the presence of one who seems to me to be above humanity, and not only of it. If all the miraculous events of the Gospels could be proved never to have occurred, it would not disturb my faith in Christ for an instant. But I am content, as it is, to believe in the possibility of so abnormal a personality being surrounded by abnormal events, though I am not in a position to disentangle the actual truth from the possibilities of misrepresentation and exaggeration.

Dealing with the rest of the New Testament, I see in the Acts of the Apostles a deeply interesting record of the first ripples of the faith in the world. In the Pauline and other epistles I see the words of fervent primitive Christians, men of real and untutored genius, in which one has amazing instances of the effect produced, on contemporary or nearly contemporary persons, of the same overwhelming personality, the person-

ality of Christ. In the Apocalypse I see a vision of deep poetical force and insight.

But in none of these compositions, though they reveal a glow and fervour of conviction that places them high among the memorials of the human spirit, do I recognise anything which is beyond human possibilities. I observe, indeed, that St. Paul's method of argument is not always perfectly consistent, nor his conclusions absolutely cogent. Such inspiration as they contain they draw from their nearness to and their close apprehension of the dim and awe-inspiring presence of Christ Himself.

If, as I say, the Church would concentrate her forces in this inner fortress, the personality of Christ, and quit the debatable ground of historical enquiry, it would be to me and to many an unfeigned relief; but meanwhile, neither scientific critics nor irrational pedants shall invalidate my claim to be of the number of believing Christians. I claim a Christian liberty of thought, while I acknowledge, with bowed head, my belief in God the Father of Men, in a Divine Christ, the Redeemer and Saviour, and in the presence in the hearts of men of a Divine spirit, leading humanity tenderly forward. I can neither affirm nor deny the literal accuracy of Scripture records;

I am not in a position to deny the superstructure of definite dogma raised by the tradition of the Church about the central truths of its teaching, but neither can I deny the possibility of an admixture of human error in the fabric. I claim my right to receive the Sacraments of my Church, believing as I do that they invigorate the soul, bring the presence of its Redeemer near, and constitute a bond of Christian unity. But I have no reason to believe that any human pronouncement whatever, the pronouncements of men of science as well as the pronouncements of theologians, are not liable to error. There is indeed no fact in the world except the fact of my own existence of which I am absolutely certain. And thus I can accept no system of religion which is based upon deductions, however subtle, from isolated texts, because I cannot be sure of the infallibility of any form of human expression. Yet, on the other hand, I seem to discern with as much certainty as I can discern anything in this world, where all is so dark, the presence upon earth at a certain date of a personality which commands my homage and allegiance. And upon this I build my trust.

THE MYSTERY OF EVIL

I WAS staying the other day in a large old country-house. One morning, my host came to me and said: "I should like to show you a curious thing. We have just discovered a cellar here that seems never to have been visited or used since the house was built, and there is the strangest fungoid growth in it I have ever seen." He took a big bunch of keys, rang the bell, gave an order for lights to be brought, and we went together to the place. There were ranges of brick-built, vaulted chambers, through which we passed, pleasant, cool places, with no plaster to conceal the native brick, with great wine-bins on either hand. It all gave one an inkling of the change in material conditions which must have taken place since they were built; the quantity of wine consumed in eighteenth-century days must have been so enormous, and the difficulty of conveyance so great, that every great householder must have felt like the Rich Fool of the parable, with much goods laid up for many years. In the corner of one of the great vaults was a low-arched door, and my friend explained that some panelling which had been taken out of an older house,

demolished to make room for the present mansion, had been piled up here, and thus the entrance had been hidden. He unlocked the door, and a strange scent came out. An abundance of lights were lit, and we went into the vault. It was the strangest scene I have ever beheld; the end of the vault seemed like a great bed, hung with brown velvet curtains, through the gaps of which were visible what seemed like white velvet pillows, strange humped conglomerations. My friend explained to me that there had been a bin at the end of the vault, out of the wood of which these singular fungi had sprouted. The whole place was uncanny and horrible. The great velvet curtains swayed in the current of air, and it seemed as though at any moment some mysterious sleeper might be awakened, might peer forth from his dark curtains, with a fretful enquiry as to why he was disturbed.

The scene dwelt in my mind for many days, and aroused in me a strange train of thought; these dim vegetable forms, with their rich luxuriance, their sinister beauty, awoke a curious repugnance in the mind. They seemed unholy and evil. And yet it is all part of the life of nature; it is just as natural, just as beautiful to find life at work in this gloomy and unvisited place,

wreathing the bare walls with these dark, soft fabrics. It was impossible not to feel that there was a certain joy of life in these growths, sprouting with such security and luxuriance in a place so precisely adapted to their well-being; and yet there was the shadow of death and darkness about them, to us whose home is the free air and the sun. It seemed to me to make a curious parable of the baffling mystery of evil, the luxuriant growth of sin in the dark soul. I have always felt that the reason why the mystery of evil is so baffling is because we so resolutely think of evil as of something inimical to the nature of God; and yet evil must derive its vitality from him. The one thing that it is impossible to believe is that, in a world ruled by an all-powerful God, anything should come into existence which is in opposition to his Will. It is impossible to arrive at any solution of the difficulty, unless we either adopt the belief that God is not all-powerful, and that there is a real dualism in nature, two powers in eternal opposition; or else realise that evil is in some way a manifestation of God. If we adopt the first theory, we may conceive of the stationary tendency in nature, its inertness, the force that tends to bring motion to a standstill, as one power, the power of Death; and we may conceive of all

motion and force as the other power, the quickening spirit, the power of life. But even here we are met with a difficulty, for when we try to transfer this dualism to the region of humanity, we see that in the phenomena of disease we are confronted, not with inertness fighting against motion, but with one kind of life, which is inimical to human life, fighting with another kind of life which is favourable to health. I mean that when a fever or a cancer lays hold of a human frame, it is nothing but the lodging inside the body of a bacterial and an infusorial life which fights against the healthy native life of the human organism. There must be, I will not say a consciousness, but a sense of triumphant life, in the cancer which feeds upon the limb, in spite of all efforts to dislodge it; and it is impossible to me to believe that the vitality of those parasitical organisms, which prey upon the human frame, is not derived from the vital impulse of God. We, who live in the free air and the sun, have a way of thinking and speaking as if the plants and animals which develop under the same conditions were of a healthy type, while the organisms which flourish in decay and darkness, such as the fungi of which I saw so strange an example, the larvæ which prey on decaying matter, the soft and pallid

worm-like forms that tunnel in vegetable ooze, were of an unhealthy type. But yet these creatures are as much the work of God as the flowers and trees, the brisk animals which we love to see about us. We are obliged in self-defence to do battle with the creatures which menace our health; we do not question our right to deprive them of life for our own comfort; but surely with this analogy before us, we are equally compelled to think of the forms of moral evil, with all their dark vitality, as the work of God's hand. It is a sad conclusion to be obliged to draw, but I can have no doubt that no comprehensive system of philosophy can ever be framed, which does not trace the vitality of what we call evil to the same hand as the vitality of what we call good. I have no doubt myself of the supremacy of a single power; but the explanation that evil came into the world by the institution of free-will, and that suffering is the result of sin, seems to me to be wholly inadequate, because the mystery of strife and pain and death is "far older than any history which is written in any book." The mistake that we make is to count up all the qualities which seem to promote our health and happiness, and to invent an anthropomorphic figure of God, whom we array upon the side which we wish to

prevail. The truth is far darker, far sterner, far more mysterious. The darkness is his not less than the light; selfishness and sin are the work of his hand, as much as unselfishness and holiness. To call this attitude of mind pessimism, and to say that it can only end in acquiescence or despair, is a sin against truth. A creed that does not take this thought into account is nothing but a delusion, with which we try to beguile the seriousness of the truth which we dread; but such a stern belief does not forbid us to struggle and to strive; it rather bids us believe that effort is a law of our natures, that we are bound to be enlisted for the fight, and that the only natures that fail are those that refuse to take a side at all.

There is no indecision in nature, though there is some illusion. The very star that rises, pale and serene, above the darkening thicket, is in reality a globe wreathed in fiery vapour, the centre of a throng of whirling planets. What we have to do is to see as deep as we can into the truth of things, not to invent paradises of thought, sheltered gardens, from which grief and suffering shall tear us, naked and protesting; to gaze into the heart of God, and then to follow as faithfully as we can the imperative voice that speaks within the soul.

RENEWAL

THERE sometimes falls upon me a great hunger of heart, a sad desire to build up and renew something — a broken building it may be, a fading flower, a failing institution, a ruinous character. I feel a great and vivid pity for a thing which sets out to be so bright and beautiful, and lapses into shapeless and uncomely neglect. Sometimes, indeed, it must be a desolate grief, a fruitless sorrow: as when a flower that has stood on one's table, and cheered the air with its freshness, and fragrance, begins to droop, and to grow stained and sordid. Or I see some dying creature, a wounded animal; or even some well-loved friend under the shadow of death, with the hue of health fading, the dear features sharpening for the last change; and then one can only bow, with such resignation as one can muster, before the dreadful law of death, pray that the passage may not be long or dark, and try to dream of the bright secrets that may be waiting on the other side.

But sometimes it is a more fruitful sadness, when one feels that decay can be arrested, that

new life can be infused; that a fresh start may be taken, and a life may be beautifully renewed, and be even the brighter, one dares to hope, for a lapse into the dreary ways of bitterness.

This sadness is most apt to beset those who have anything to do with the work of education. One feels sometimes, with a sudden shiver, as when the shadow of a cloud passes over a sunlit garden, that many elements are at work in a small society; that an evil secret is spreading over lives that were peaceful and contented, that suspicion and disunion and misunderstanding are springing up, like poisonous weeds, in the quiet corner that God has given one to dress and keep. Then perhaps one tries to put one's hand on what is amiss; sometimes one does too much, and in the wrong way; one has not enough faith, one dares not leave enough to God. Or from timidity or diffidence, or from the base desire not to be troubled, from the poor hope that perhaps things will straighten themselves out, one does too little; and that is the worst shadow of all, the shadow of cowardice or sloth.

Sometimes, too, one has the grief of seeing a slow and subtle change passing over the manner and face of one for whom one cares — not the change of languor or physical weakness; that can

be pityingly borne; but one sees innocence withering, indifference to things wholesome and fair creeping on, even sometimes a ripe and evil sort of beauty maturing, such as comes of looking at evil unashamed, and seeing its strong seductiveness. One feels instinctively that the door which had been open before between such a soul and one's own spirit is being slowly and firmly closed, or even, if one attempts to open it, pulled to with a swift motion; and then one may hear sounds within, and even see, in that moment, a rush of gliding forms, that makes one sure that a visitant is there, who has brought with him a wicked company; and then one has to wait in sadness, with now and then a timid knocking, even happy, it may be, if the soul sometimes calls fretfully within, to say that it is occupied and cannot come forth.

But sometimes, God be praised, it is the other way. A year ago a man came at his own request to see me. I hardly knew him; but I could see at once that he was in the grip of some hard conflict, which withered his natural bloom. I do not know how all came to be revealed; but in a little while he was speaking with simple frankness and naturalness of all his troubles, and they were many. What was the most touching thing of all

was that he spoke as if he were quite alone in his experience, isolated and shut off from his kind, in a peculiar horror of darkness and doubt; as if the thoughts and difficulties at which he stumbled had never strewn a human path before. I said but little to him; and, indeed, there was but little to say. It was enough that he should "cleanse the stuff'd bosom of the perilous stuff that weighs upon the heart." I tried to make him feel that he was not alone in the matter and that other feet had trodden the dark path before him. No advice is possible in such cases; "therein the patient must minister to himself"; the solution lies in the mind of the sufferer. He knows what he ought to do; the difficulty is for him sufficiently to desire to do it; yet even to speak frankly of cares and troubles is very often to melt and disperse the morbid mist that gathers round them, which grows in solitude. To state them makes them plain and simple; and, indeed, it is more than that; for I have often noticed that the mere act of formulating one's difficulties in the hearing of one who sympathises and feels often brings the solution with it. One finds, like Christian in Doubting Castle, the key which has lain in one's bosom all the time — the key of Promise; and when one has finished the recital, one is lost in

bewilderment that one ever was in any doubt at all.

A year has passed since that date, and I have had the happiness of seeing health and contentment stream back into the man's face. He has not overcome, he has not won an easy triumph; but he is in the way now, not wandering on trackless hills.

So, in the mood of which I spoke at first — the mood in which one desires to build up and renew — one must not yield oneself to luxurious and pathetic reveries, or allow oneself to muse and wonder in the half-lit region in which one may beat one's wings in vain — the region, I mean, of sad stupefaction as to why the world is so full of broken dreams, shattered hopes, and unfulfilled possibilities. One must rather look round for some little definite failure that is within the circle of one's vision. And even so, there sometimes comes what is the most evil and subtle temptation of all, which creeps upon the mind in lowly guise, and preaches inaction. What concern have you, says the tempting voice, to meddle with the lives and characters of others — to guide, to direct, to help — when there is so much that is bitterly amiss with your own heart and life? How will you dare to preach what you do not

practise? The answer of the brave heart is that, if one is aware of failure, if one has suffered, if one has gathered experience, one must be ready to share it. If I falter and stumble under my own heavy load, which I have borne so querulously, so clumsily, shall I not say a word which can help a fellow-sufferer to bear his load more easily, help him to avoid the mistakes, the falls into which my own perversity has betrayed me? To make another's burden lighter is to lighten one's own burden; and, sinful as it may be to err, it is still more sinful to see another err, and be silent, to withhold the word that might save him. Perhaps no one can help so much as one that has suffered himself, who knows the turns of the sad road, and the trenches which beset the way.

For this comes most truly the joy of repentance; it is joy to feel that one's own lesson is learnt, and that the feeble feet are a little stronger; but if one may also feel that another has taken heed, has been saved the fall that must have come if he had not been warned, one does not grudge one's own pain, that has brought a blessing with it, that is outside of one's own blessing; one hardly even grudges the sin.

AFTER DEATH

I HAD so strange a dream or vision the other night, that I cannot refrain from setting it down; because the strangeness and the wonder of it seem to make it impossible for me to have conceived of it myself; it was suggested by nothing, originated by nothing that I can trace; it merely came to me out of the void.

After confused and troubled dreams of terror and bewilderment, enacted in blind passages and stifling glooms, with crowds of unknown figures passing rapidly to and fro, I seemed to grow suddenly light-hearted and joyful. I next appeared to myself to be sitting or reclining on the grassy top of a cliff, in bright sunlight. The ground fell precipitously in front of me, and I saw to left and right the sharp crags and horns of the rock-face below me; behind me was a wide space of grassy down, with a fresh wind racing over it. The sky was cloudless. Far below I could see yellow sands, on which a blue sea broke in crisp waves. To the left a river flowed through a little hamlet, clustered round a church; I looked down on the roofs of the small houses, and

saw people passing to and fro, like ants. The river spread itself out in shallow shining channels over the sand, to join the sea. Further to the left rose shadowy headland after headland, and to the right lay a broad well-watered plain, full of trees and villages, bounded by a range of blue hills. On the sea moved ships, the wind filling their sails, and the sun shining on them with a peculiar brightness. The only sound in my ears was that of the whisper of the wind in the grass and stone crags.

But I soon became aware with a shock of pleasant surprise that my perception of the whole scene was of a different quality to any perception I had before experienced. I have spoken of seeing and hearing; but I became aware that I was doing neither; the perceptions, so to speak, both of seeing and hearing were not distinct, but the same. I was aware, for instance, at the same moment, of the *whole* scene, both of what was behind me and what was in front of me. I have described what I saw successively, because there is no other way of describing it; but it was all present at once in my mind, and I had no need to turn my attention to one point or another, but everything was there before me, in a unity at which I cannot even hint in words. I then be-

came aware too, that, though I have spoken of myself as seated or reclined, I had no body, but was merely, as it were, a sentient point. In a moment I became aware that to transfer that sentience to another point was merely an act of will. I was able to test this; in an instant I was close above the village, which a moment before was far below me, and I perceived the houses, the very faces of the people close at hand; at another moment I was buried deep in the cliff, and felt the rock with its fissures all about me; at another moment, following my wish, I was beneath the sea, and saw the untrodden sands about me, with the blue sunlit water over my head. I saw the fish dart and poise above me, the ribbons of sea-weed floating up, just swayed by the currents, shells crawling like great snails on the ooze, crabs hurrying about among piles of boulders. But something drew me back to my first station, I know not why; and there I poised, as a bird might have poised, and lost myself in a blissful dream. Then it darted into my mind that I was what I had been accustomed to call dead. So this was what lay on the other side of the dark passage, this lightness, this perfect freedom, this undreamed-of peace! I had not a single care or anxiety. It seemed as if nothing

could trouble my repose and happiness. I could only think with a deep compassion of those who were still pent in uneasy bodies, under strait and sad conditions, anxious, sad, troubled, and blind, not knowing that the shadow of death which encompassed them was but the cloud which veiled the gate of perfect and unutterable happiness.

I felt rising in my mind a sense of all that lay before me, of all the mysteries that I would penetrate, all the unvisited places that I would see. But at present I was too full of peace and quiet happiness to do anything but stay in an infinite content where I was. All sense of *ennui* or restlessness had left me. I was utterly free, utterly blest. I did, indeed, once send my thought to the home which I loved, and saw a darkened house, and my dear ones moving about with grief written legibly on their faces. I saw my mother sitting looking at some letters which I perceived to be my own, and was aware that she wept. But I could not even bring myself to grieve at that, because I knew that the same peace and joy that filled me was also surely awaiting them, and the darkest passage, the sharpest human suffering, seemed so utterly little and trifling in the light of my new knowledge; and I was soon back on my cliff-top again, content to wait, to rest, to

luxuriate in a happiness which seemed to have nothing selfish about it, because the satisfaction was so perfectly pure and natural.

While I thus waited I became aware, with the same sort of sudden perception, of a presence beside me. It had no outward form; but I knew that it was a spirit full of love and kindness: it seemed to me to be old; it was not divine, for it brought no awe with it; and yet it was not quite human; it was a spirit that seemed to me to have been human, but to have risen into a higher sphere of perception. I simply felt a sense of deep and pure companionship. And presently I became aware that some communication was passing between my consciousness and the consciousness of the newly-arrived spirit. It did not take place in words, but in thought; though only by words can I now represent it.

"Yes," said the other, "you do well to rest and to be happy: is it not a wonderful experience? and yet you have been through it many times already, and will pass through it many times again."

I suppose that I did not wholly understand this, for I said: "I do not grasp that thought, though I am certain it is true; have I then died before?"

"Yes," said the other; "many times. It is a long progress; you will remember soon, when you have had time to reflect, and when the sweet novelty of the change has become more customary. You have but returned to us again for a little; one needs that, you know, at first; one needs some refreshment and repose after each one of our lives, to be renewed, to be strengthened for what comes after."

All at once I understood. I knew that my last life had been one of many lives lived at all sorts of times and dates, and under various conditions; that at the end of each I had returned to this joyful freedom.

It was the first cloud that passed over my thought. "Must I return again to life?" I said.

"Oh, yes," said the other; "you see that; you will soon return again — but never mind that now; you are here to drink your fill of the beautiful things which you will only remember by glimpses and visions when you are back in the little life again."

And then I had a sudden intuition. I seemed to be suddenly in a small and ugly street of a dark town. I saw slatternly women run in and out of the houses; I saw smoke-stained grimy children

playing in the gutter. Above the poor, ill-kept houses a factory poured its black smoke into the air, and hummed behind its shuttered windows. I knew in a sad flash of thought that I was to be born there, to be brought up as a wailing child, under sad and sordid conditions, to struggle into a life of hard and hopeless labour, in the midst of vice, and poverty, and drunkenness, and hard usage. It filled me for a moment with a sort of nauseous dread, remembering the free and liberal conditions of my last life, the wealth and comfort I had enjoyed.

"No," said the other; for in a moment I was back again, "that is an unworthy thought — it is but for a moment; and you will return to this peace again."

But the sad thought came down upon me like a cloud. "Is there no escape?" I said; and at that, in a moment, the other spirit seemed to chide me, not angrily, but patiently and compassionately. "One suffers," he said, "but one gains experience; one rises," adding more gently: "We do not know why it must be, of course — but it is the Will; and however much one may doubt and suffer in the dark world there, one does not doubt of the wisdom or the love of it here." And I knew in a moment that I did not doubt,

but that I would go willingly wherever I should be sent.

And then my thought became concerned with the spirit that spoke with me, and I said, "And what is your place and work? for I think you are like me and yet unlike." And he said: "Yes, it is true; I have to return thither no more; that is finished for me, and I grudge no single step of the dark road: I cannot explain to you what my work or place is; but I am old, and have seen many things; each of us has to return and return, not indeed till we are made perfect, but till we have finished that part of our course; but the blessedness of this peace grows and grows, while it becomes easier to bear what happens in that other place, for we grow strong and simple and sincere, and then the world can hurt us but little. We learn that we must not judge men; but we know that when we see them cruel and vicious and selfish, they are then but children learning their first lessons; and on each of our visits to this place we see that the evil matters less and less, and the hope becomes brighter and brighter; till at last we see." And I then seemed to turn to him in thought, for he said with a grave joy: "Yes, I have seen." And presently I was left alone to my happiness.

How long it lasted I cannot tell; but presently I seemed less free, less light of heart; and soon I knew that I was bound; and after a space I woke into the world again, and took up my burden of cares.

But for all that I have a sense of hopefulness left which I think will not quite desert me. From what dim cell of the brain my vision rose, I know not, but though it came to me in so precise and clear a form, yet I cannot help feeling that something deep and true has been revealed to me, some glimpse of pure heaven and bright air, that lies outside our little fretted lives.

THE ETERNAL WILL

I HAVE spoken above, I know well, of things in which I have no skill to speak; I know no philosophy or metaphysics; to look into a philosophical book is to me like looking into a room piled up with bricks, the pure materials of thought; they have no meaning for me, until the beautiful mind of some literary architect has built them into a house of life; but just as a shallow pool can reflect the dark and infinite spaces of night, pierced with stars, so in my own shallow mind these perennial difficulties, which lie behind all that we do and say, can be for a moment mirrored.

The only value that such thoughts can have in life is that they should teach us to live in a frank and sincere mood, waiting patiently for the Lord, as the old Psalmist said. My own philosophy is a very simple one, and, if I could only be truer to it, it would bring me the strength which I lack. It is this: that being what we are, such frail, mysterious, inexplicable beings, we should wait humbly and hopefully upon God, not attempting, nor even wishing, to make up

our minds upon these deep secrets, only determined that we will be true to the inner light, and that we will not accept any solution which depends for its success upon neglecting or overlooking any of the phenomena with which we are confronted. We find ourselves placed in the world, in definite relations with certain people, endowed with certain qualities, with faults and fears, with hopes and joys, with likes and dislikes. Evil haunts us like a shadow, and though it menaces our happiness, we fall again and again under its dominion; in the depths of our spirit a voice speaks, which assures us again and again that truth and purity and love are the best and dearest things that we can desire; and that voice, however imperfectly, I try to obey, because it seems the strongest and clearest of all the voices that call to me. I try to regard all experience, whether sweet or bitter, fair or foul, as sent me by the great and awful power that put me where I am. The strongest and best things in the world seem to me to be peace and tranquillity, and the same hidden power seems to be leading me thither; and to lead me all the faster whenever I try not to fret, not to grieve, not to despair. "*Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you,*" says the Divine

Word; and the more that I follow intuition rather than reason, the nearer I seem to come to the truth. I have lately wasted much fruitless thought over an anxious decision, weighing motives, forecasting possibilities. I knew at the time how useless it all was, and that my course would be made clear at the right moment; and I will tell the story of how it was made clear, as testimony to the perfect guidance of the divine hand. I was taking a journey, and the weary process was going on in my mind; every possible argument for and against the step was being reviewed and tested; I could not read, I could not even look abroad upon the world. The train drew up at a dull suburban station, where our tickets were collected. The signal was given, and we started. It was at this moment that the conviction came, and I saw how I must act, with a certainty which I could not gainsay or resist. My reason had anticipated the opposite decision, but I had no longer any doubt or hesitation. The only question was how and when to announce the result; but when I returned home the same evening there was the letter waiting for me which gave the very opportunity I desired; and I have since learnt without surprise that the letter was being

penned at the very moment when the conviction came to me.

I have told this experience in detail, because it seems to me to be a very perfect example of the suddenness with which conviction comes. But neither do I grudge the anxious reveries which for many days had preceded that conviction, because through them I learnt something of the inner weakness of my nature. But the true secret of it all is that we ought to live as far as we can in the day, the hour, the minute; to waste no time in anxious forecasting and miserable regrets, but just do what lies before us as faithfully as possible. Gradually, too, one learns that the restricting of what is called religion to certain times of prayer and definite solemnities is the most pitiful of all mistakes; life lived with the intuition that I have indicated is all religion. The most trivial incident has to be interpreted; every word and deed and thought becomes full of a deep significance. One has no longer any anxious sense of duty; one desires no longer either to impress or influence; one aims only at guarding the quality of all one does or says — or rather the very word "aims" is a wrong one; there is no longer any aim or effort, except the effort to feel which way

the gentle guiding hand would have us to go; the only sorrow that is possible is when we rather perversely follow our own will and pleasure.

The reason why I desire this book to say its few words to my brothers and sisters of this life, without any intrusion of personality, is that I am so sure of the truth of what I say, that I would not have any one distracted from the principles I have tried to put into words, by being able to compare it with my own weak practice. I am so far from having attained; I have, I know, so many weary leagues to traverse yet, that I would not have my faithless and perverse wanderings known. But the secret waits for all who can throw aside convention and insincerity, who can make the sacrifice with a humble heart, and throw themselves utterly and fearlessly into the hands of God. Societies, organisations, ceremonies, forms, authority, dogma — they are all outside; silently and secretly, in the solitude of one's heart, must the lonely path be found; but the slender track once beneath our feet, all the complicated relations of the world become clear and simple. We have no need to change our path in life, to seek for any human guide, to desire new conditions, because we have the one Guide close to us, closer than friend or brother or lover, and

we know that we are set where he would have us to be. Such a belief destroys in a flash all our embarrassment in dealing with others, all our anxieties in dealing with ourselves. In dealing with ourselves we shall only desire to be faithful, fearless and sincere; in dealing with others we shall try to be patient, tender, appreciative, and hopeful. If we have to blame, we shall blame without bitterness, without the outraged sense of personal vanity that brings anger with it. If we can praise, we shall praise with generous prodigality; we shall not think of ourselves as a centre of influence, as radiating example and precept; but we shall know our own failures and difficulties, and shall realise as strongly that others are led likewise, and that each is the Father's peculiar care, as we realise it about ourselves. There will be no thrusting of ourselves to the front, nor an uneasy lingering upon the outskirts of the crowd, because we shall know that our place and our course are defined. We may crave for happiness, but we shall not resent sorrow. The dreariest and saddest day becomes the inevitable, the true setting for our soul; we must drink the draught, and not fear to taste its bitterest savour; it is the Father's cup. That a Christian, in such a mood, can concern himself with what is called

the historical basis of the Gospels, is a thought which can only be met by a smile; for there stands the record of perhaps the only life ever lived upon earth that conformed itself, at every moment, in the darkest experiences that life could bring, entirely and utterly to the Divine Will. One who walks in the light that I have spoken of is as inevitably a Christian as he is a human being, and is as true to the spirit of Christ as he is indifferent to the human accretions that have gathered round the august message.

The possession of such a secret involves no retirement from the world, no breaking of ties, no ecclesiastical exercises, no endeavour to penetrate obscure ideas. It is as simple as the sunlight and the air. It involves no protest, no phrase, no renunciation. Its protest will be an unconcerned example, its phrase will be a perfect sincerity of speech, its renunciation will be what it does, not what it abstains from doing. It will go or stay as the inner voice bids it. It will not attempt the impossible nor the novel. Very clearly, from hour to hour, the path will be made plain, the weakness fortified, the sin purged away. It will judge no other life, it will seek no goal; it will sometimes strive and cry, it will sometimes rest; it will move as gently and simply in unison with

the one supreme will, as the tide moves beneath the moon, piled in the central deep with all its noises, flooding the mud-stained waterway, where the ships ride together, or creeping softly upon the pale sands of some sequestered bay.

UNTIL THE EVENING

I STOP sometimes on a landing in an old house, where I often stay, to look at a dusky, faded water-colour that hangs upon the wall. I do not think its technical merit is great, but it somehow has the poetical quality. It represents, or seems to represent, a piece of high open ground, down-land or heath, with a few low bushes growing there, sprawling and wind-brushed; a road crosses the fore-ground, and dips over to the plain beyond, a forest tract full of dark woodland, dappled by open spaces. There is a long faint distant line of hills on the horizon. The time appears to be just after sunset, when the sky is still full of a pale liquid light, before objects have lost their colour, but are just beginning to be tinged with dusk. In the road stands the figure of a man, with his back turned, his hand shading his eyes as he gazes out across the plain. He appears to be a wayfarer, and to be weary but not dispirited. There is a look of serene and sober content about him, how communicated I know not. He would seem to have far to go,

but yet to be certainly drawing nearer to his home, which indeed he seems to discern afar off. The picture bears the simple legend, *Until the Evening*.

This design seems always to be charged for me with a beautiful and grave meaning. Just so would I draw near to the end of my pilgrimage, wearied but tranquil, assured of rest and welcome. The freshness and blithe eagerness of the morning are over, the solid hours of sturdy progress are gone, the heat of the day is past, and only the gentle descent among the shadows remains, with cool airs blowing from darkling thickets, laden with woodland scents, and the rich fragrance of rushy dingles. Ere the night falls the wayfarer will push the familiar gate open, and see the lamp-lit windows of home, with the dark chimneys and gables outlined against the green sky. Those that love him are awaiting him, listening for the footfall to draw near.

Is it not possible to attain this? And yet how often does it seem to be the fate of a human soul to stumble, like one chased and hunted, with dazed and terrified air, and hurried piteous phrase, down the darkening track. Yet one should rather approach God, bearing in careful hands the priceless and precious gift of life,

ready to restore it if it be his will. God grant us so to live, in courage and trust, that, when he calls us we may pass willingly and with a quiet confidence to the gate that opens into tracts unknown!

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